FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
SEPTEMBER 29, 2002

BY WHAT AUTHORITY — OR— WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

John M. Buchanan

Perhaps one of the most remarkable phenomena of our age, at the end of what we like to call "modernity," is this palpable search for the good, for goodness, for God. Some will call it a revival.... I prefer to call it a pilgrimage, whose characteristic is the search for that which has not been achieved. This is not a backward, nostalgic, sentimental retreat into the religious certainties of an earlier age ... this is truly counter – cultural, new,
full of adventure; and that others in other times have discovered what these now seek is a sign of encouragement in the pilgrimage.

Peter J. Gomes
The Good Book

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

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September 29, 2002

John M. Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 78:1-16
Exodus 17:1-7
Matthew 21:32

"By what authority are you doing these things?" Matthew 21:23

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to the word you have for us this morning: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

You might say that Jesus has authority issues. On the day before the incident in this text occurred — this conversation with elders and chief priest in the temple — he boldly, almost brazenly challenged the religious and political authorities by riding a donkey into the crowded capital of his nation in the very way the promised king was supposed to come. The police and the politicians are very nervous. His noisy and disorderly street demonstration proceeded to the Temple, the very symbol of religious authority, where, all of things, he dismounted, strode right into the outer court where the Temple vendors had set up shop, selling animals to religious pilgrims for sacrifice and with his entourage looking on, some probably urging him on, others — more perhaps, getting nervous — Jesus starts overturning the tables and ripping down the flimsy material that divides the stalls and physically assaulting the vendors. It's quite a gesture. It's quite a challenge to authority.

So the very next day when he returned to the scene —they were waiting for him: chief priests, elders of the people; the clergy and the Board of Trustees. They're good men. They believe in what they're doing. They believe in the authority of their religion, its sacred rituals. They believe in the authority of their own office. They regard a challenge to their authority as a challenge to their very way of life. And they're stunned and angry at the presumptuousness of this young man from Nazareth. And so they ask a very natural question, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?"

Gracia Grindal, who teaches at Luther Seminary in St. Paul serves on many committees that evaluate students' suitability as candidates for professional ministry, and wonders how Jesus would do in front of a credentialing committee.

She imagines the committee report:

> "The candidate seems to have trouble with authority. We recommend that he be sent to a counselor to work on these issues before he goes any further in the process. There are repeated instances of this problem in his history. He is known to have been impertinent to his elders as far back as age 12, when he argued a fine theological point with them in

> the temple, without any consideration for the feelings of his parents. It doesn't appear that he has dealt with that issue yet. The Clinical Pastoral Education report also hints at the same problem. We recommend that he take an internship. Furthermore, he has anger issues — which he needs to deal with. It is reported that he entered a church and threw out the people selling souvenirs and candles." [The Christian Century, 9/11/2002]

It is a pretty good question, don't you think? "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you the authority?" In fact, it's a question you and I very well might ask.

I grew up in a time and environment when the issue of authority was crystal clear. You respected and abided by the authority of the authorities, whoever they might be: the police, the government, the school and its principal, religion and clergy, grown-ups in general. Over all of life hovered the mystical authority of big institutions: the government, the president — whose authority was to be respected regardless of which party he represented: the big TV networks, CBS, ABC, NBC — whose news anchors came into our homes every evening to tell us what was happening in the world and whose reports it never occurred to anyone to question or doubt: blue chip corporations entrusted to do the right thing for the common good. And parental authority: parental decisions were not questioned, at least, openly. And when they were — when we mustered the courage to ask "Why? Why can't I stay out late?" the conventional answer was, "Because I said so, that's why." Conversation over. Authority articulated, acknowledged, respected. Case closed.

We are in a new place in regard to authority these days. A slow shift away from the traditional way of thinking about authority — away from the traditional authority structures — began about 40 years ago. It had something to do with Vietnam and the cultural revolution that occurred simultaneously. It had to do with Watergate. And it had to do with a general loss of certainty about what we know for sure and what we can count on. We're not so certain about anything anymore. A famous 1960's bumper sticker put it bluntly and eloquently "Question Authority." I still see one occasionally — mostly on dilapidated Volkswagen vans.

One of our most thoughtful scholars, Walter Brueggemann, thinks a lot about the topic these days. The name of this new time in which we live, Brueggemann and others teach, is Post-Modernism and it is characterized, he says, by the loss of certainty about a lot of things and the now almost complete shift of authority from big institutions to the individual. We Protestants have always been a little shy when it comes to ecclesiastical authority, but even our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters are no longer automatically deferential. In matters of personal behavior, when it comes to family planning and birth control, for instance, there is no longer a measurable difference between Roman Catholics and everybody else in spite of the hierarchy's insistence that birth control is a sin.

Deeper still, the theological consensus on which religious authority used to rest is gone. Brueggemann writes about the task of preaching sermons:

> "There was a time...when the Christian preacher could count on ... a consensus. There was a time when the assumption of God completely dominated Western imagination."

No longer: Atheism is quite credible, Brueggemann observes and something of a complete reversal has occurred. To actually believe in God and claim to live life in relation to that belief, or worse yet, as an expression of that belief, is a "risky intellectual outpost." [Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope, P.5]

William Buckley famously observed that the best way to stop a New York City cocktail party conversation dead in its tracks is to say the word "God" in a way other than an expletive. Say it twice and you won't be invited back.

Religious authority, which used to be invested in institutions, now resides with the individual. One of Robert Bellah's interviews for his important book *Habits of the Heart* became a household name by eloquently capturing this new reality. Her name was Shelia. When asked about her practice of religion, she said that she was religious but not interested in church. Faith for her was a safe internal spiritual comfort zone. She was, she said, her own little church. My religion, she said with amazing candor, is "Sheliaism." Sheilaism is individualism raised to the status of authority. We are, we think, in charge here. There is no authority beyond my values, my priorities, my opinions, my wants, my personal needs, my desires … .

Brueggemann says the logo of this new individualism — this new authority — is the NIKE "Swoosh." "Life is for winners," it says: "those who make it in the market or sports arena, who live well, are self-indulgent, and who never get involved in anything outside their own success… It has become a universal symbol of success and well being, a symbol worn by affluent suburbanites. It is worn by poor people in third world economies who for a moment can entertain a fantasy." [P. 26]

And now, to the surprise of almost everyone, in the midst of this new Postmodern, individualistic, materialistic, "authority-less" era; an apparent major renewal of interest in religion, in things of the spirit, in God, and in life with God, if you will.

Peter Gomes, minister of Harvard's Memorial Church, describes a genuine revival of interest in religion and not just academically, religion as a set of intellectual propositions to be analyzed, debated, or critiqued, but religion as authentic guidance for life: not just feel-good religion, but religion as authentic authority, a life to be lived.

Gomes comments, "A cynic might say that if adolescent rebellion thirty years ago was to drop out of church, adolescent rebellion today is to drop in. Sometimes their parents are bewildered by it." [The Good Book, p.334]

When he was here speaking a year or so ago, Gomes told about a frantic mother of a Harvard freshman who made an appointment to see him. She told him that she and her husband were not anti-religion, that they were agnostics and their family life simply had no place for or concern about things religious. "But now," she said, "my daughter's apparently gone off the deep end. You'll have to help us Dr. Gomes." "What has she done?" Gomes asked, fully expecting the woman to report that her daughter had joined the Hari-Krishna's or had run off with the Moonies. "Why, she's become an Episcopalian!" the distressed mother said.

Gomes says that the world of secular assumptions is fast coming to an end because those secular assumptions did not prove to be helpful and certainly didn't deliver on the promises of meaning, purpose, personal fulfillment, or even happiness, for that matter.

The churches are filling up with "those whose faith was in the exchangeable commodities of the world, and who have lost their faith in mammon and are seeking out God. [p. 345]

It's a thought that occurs to me and moves me deeply every single Sunday morning when you show up here again, when this place fills up with the very people the sociologists were telling us just a while ago were Postmodern and therefore dismissive of religious institutions, religious rituals, with religion itself. It moves me deeply every month when 25–30-35 of those very people stand up and affirm faith in Jesus Christ and promise to be his disciple and to follow and serve him every day of their lives.

There is something like a search for genuine authority going on and it focuses here, as it does in this text, on the person of Jesus Christ.

What makes a Christian is the act of trusting Jesus Christ with your life: the accepting him as the authority, the crowning of him as sovereign of your heart.

Sometimes that authoritative sovereignty of Jesus Christ challenges other authorities, the authority of the sate for instance — as it did for the faithful German Christians who formed the Confessing Church and resisted Hitler's Nazism; as it did for brave young Americans who, a generation ago, broke the law in the name of racial justice. Brian Blount, who teaches New Testament at Princeton, recalls how Biblical authority was used to justify racism and slavery. "There have been many esteemed men and women of faith who argued that (Biblical passages about slavery) ought to be the last word and who defended the enslavement of black people in the United States up to, through, and even beyond the horror of the Civil War."

But the slaves themselves had a better and more accurate sense of real authority. Professor Blount writes that in spite of laws that made it illegal for slaves to read, somehow they learned the story of Jesus and internalized it. So when slave owners told them that slaves should obey their masters because the Bible says slaves should obey their masters, they knew there was higher authority than the law, the system, the slave master, higher even than Bible words, namely Jesus himself.

Howard Thurman was Dean of the Chapel of Howard University and remembers his grandmother, who was a slave. He wrote:

> "My regular chore was to do all the reading for my grandmother. She could neither read nor write...With a feeling of great timidity, I asked her one day why it was she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me, I shall never forget...'During the days of slavery,' she said, 'the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves...Always the white minister used as his text something from St. Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves be obedient to your masters.' Then he would go on to show how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I

promised my maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever comes, I would not read that part of the Bible." [Brian Blount, Struggling with Scripture, p. 58]

The slaves knew that real authority is Jesus Christ. They knew in their hearts — what our Presbyterian tradition has always said about Biblical authority — that it is not in the words themselves taken out of context, but in the way Biblical words are interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ.

After his conversation with the religious authorities about authority, Jesus told them a little story. A man tells his son to go to work in the vineyard and the son refuses, but later changes his mind and goes. The man orders another son who agreed to work but changes his mind and does not go. "Which son did the father's will?" The answer is obvious, the son who initially refused but went to work.

Faith, Jesus was saying, authoritative faith, goes to work in the vineyard regardless of verbal affirmations. Faith does the work of God regardless of creeds and intellectual formulas, doctrines, orthodoxies.

Authoritative faith doesn't just talk about God. It does God's work in the world. Authoritative faith begins for you — not when you finally resolve all your theological questions: faith begins when you decide that Jesus Christ is authoritative in your life and you show up for work in the vineyard.

Faith began for Peter, not when he finally figured out who Jesus was, got his Christology pinned down. Faith happened when Peter, scared to death, stepped out of his boat in a storm to follow.

Faith began for James and John, not after they had a seminar on self-discovery, but when they dropped their fishing nets and got up and followed.

Faith begins, authoritative faith, when you and I hear the call of Christ to come, follow, go into the world, serve, love, laugh, rejoice, give your life away in some improbably adventure — tutor a child, embrace a homeless man, provide for a hungry and cold woman, empty your pockets, lose your very life.

The authority of Jesus derives from his doing just that — showing us how to live an authentic human life by giving life away in love. Our authority symbol, Walter Brueggemann says is not the Nike Swoosh, but the cross.

Who's ultimately in charge of your life? The invitation is to acknowledge Jesus Christ, to acknowledge that in him, in what he said and what he did, was the very authority of God. The invitation is to give him the authority in your life that is his already, by God's grace: to crown him sovereign somewhere in your heart.

And somewhere deep in your heart and mine is not only a need to do that, but a desire, a wanting.

"Lord, I want to be a Christian," the slaves and their descendents sang.

Lord I want to be more loving, more holy.
Lord, I want to be like Jesus,
in my heart,
in my heart.

Amen.